NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
Humanities

DIVISION OF **EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Narrative Section of a Successful Proposal

The attached document contains the narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful proposal may be crafted. Every successful proposal is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Enduring Questions guidelines at www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title:	NEH Enduring Questions Course on "Where Does Morality Come From?"
Institution:	University of Arizona
Project Directors:	Michael Gill
Grant Program:	Enduring Questions

NEH Enduring Questions Course Grant: Narrative
Michael B. Gill, PhD., Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Arizona

Where does morality come from?

Where does morality come from? This is a question as enduring as reflection on human life itself. Once we begin to think about the way humans live, we are inevitably led to wonder why humans so strongly, yet variously, insist on the morality of some ways of living and so deeply, yet differently, disapprove of others. Why do we encourage, praise, and reward certain kinds of actions and discourage, condemn, and punish other kinds? Why do we make distinctively *moral* judgments? Why is morality so pervasive to human experience?

Intellectual rationale and teaching value. Because moral judgment is so central to how we think about ourselves, reflection on the origins of morality reaches across all time periods and into a plethora of different areas of study. The question of morality's origin thus plays a starring role in fields such as psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and religion — as well as being at the heart of many of the greatest narrative works. Indeed, some of the most memorable literary characters ever developed are so compelling precisely because they embody vividly a view of the underlying reasons for living in one way rather than another. These embodied or "lived-in" responses powerfully convey the high stakes of the issue of morality's origins. And through engagement with these compelling narrative works, students can come to see that humanistic disciplines more generally are grappling theoretically with the same high-stake moral issues portrayed dramatically in narrative.

In the proposed course, we will explore five influential answers to the question of morality's origin. These competing answers propose that morality comes from

- God
- Culture

- Reason
- Self-interest
- Emotion.

Each answer commands devoted recruits from every historical era — ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary. Indeed, what an examination of the issue soon reveals is that reflection on the origins of morality refuses to respect historical and disciplinary boundaries.

My sequential presentation of the answers should not be taken to imply any order of conceptual or historical progression. The expression of each of the answers bears on the views of all the others in ways that make a linear path through the topic an oversimplification. It is also somewhat of an oversimplification to present the five answers as completely discrete, for there have always been thinkers who have combined elements of different answers into complex and profound conceptions of morality, many of which we will explore in this course.

Envisioned course design. The course will have five units, each one emanating from a single great narrative work that has at its center a character or characters who embody answers to the question of morality's origin.

The view that morality comes from God will focus on Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov (from *Crime and Punishment*), who struggles monumentally with the idea that if God does not exist, then everything is permitted. We will join to this struggle Plato's *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates famously raises the question of whether certain actions are good because they are loved by God or whether God loves certain actions because they are good. Many towering religious thinkers — such as Luther and Calvin — have argued for the first of these two options, and in the first part of the course we will read selections from some of those "Divine Command Theorists" in order to explore more fully the position at which Raskolnikov eventually arrives. Plato, however, believed that the Divine Command Theory is

fundamentally mistaken, and we will see his reasons elucidated and advanced by the Cambridge Platonists, a group of 17th century religious thinkers.

The main objection Plato and the Cambridge Platonists leveled at the Divine Command Theory is that it implies that God's commands are arbitrary when in fact there must be eternal and immutable *reasons* for everything God does. From this criticism of the Divine Command Theory springs the idea that morality comes from reason, which will be the topic of the second unit of the course. Our central character will be Will Kane, from the classic film *High Noon*, who believes he is duty-bound to protect the town even though his self-interest, emotions, and the townspeople themselves do not support that course of action. Kane's moral commitment grippingly represents the conception of morality propounded in Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, perhaps the most powerful defense of moral rationalism ever developed. Nor is this rationalist view of morality confined to Kantian philosophers; it also lies at the center of theories of human cognitive development, such as that influentially proposed by the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg in the footsteps of Jean Piaget. These psychological theories have come under attack, however, and the doubts raised about them — by, for instance, the psychologist Blair and the cognitive scientist Nichols — may in turn cast doubt on the rationalist moral theories of philosophers such as Kant.

In the third unit, we turn to the power of culture, asking whether moral commitments might originate in the norms of society. Our central text will be Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which the characters of Antigone and Creon personify conflicting cultural norms. To elucidate the struggle between these two, we turn to the penetrating *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche argues that morality originates in historical circumstances and human conflict. Nietzsche presents his view as an attack on the idea that morality comes from God or from reason, which will bring this unit into close contact with the first two. We will also see how

the cultural answer to the question of morality's origins has been advanced by historians such as Herodotus, anthropologists such as Benedict, and sociologists such as Sumner.

The view that morality originates in culture, in all its different guises, has been strongly criticized in just about every time and place it has arisen. One of the most trenchant criticisms of the cultural view is that it fails to account for deep normative commitments that all societies have in common. One explanation of these pervasive normative commonalties invokes eternal and immutable moral reasons, which would take us back to the rationalist view. An alternative explanation is that morality originates in aspects of human psychology that all persons have in common but which are not purely rational. One of the most perennially attractive versions of this answer is the egoist view that morality originates in the self-interested desire for fame, honor, and status. This will be the focus of the fourth unit of the course. Our literary foil will be Beowulf, from the Old English epic, whose motive for undertaking great feats (at least in his youth) is to gain everlasting glory. We will see how early modern philosophers Thomas Hobbes ("men are continually in competition for honour and dignity") and Bernard Mandeville ("the moral virtues are the political offspring which flattery begot upon pride") systematized the egoist conception of morality implicit in parts of *Beowulf*. We will also see that these egoist positions have ancient antecedents in philosophers such as Epicurus and contemporary defenders among Darwinians such as Pinker.

Many have argued, however, that humans possess fundamentally non-selfish emotions and that it is just those emotions in which morality originates. This emotion-based view will be the focus of the fifth unit, and Dickens' *Hard Times* will be its central text. Dickens' character Mr Gradgrind represents the view that morality is based on rationality, or "facts" and not "fancy." But the novel portrays his eschewal of emotion as a moral failure. Mr Bounderby (Gradgrind's associate) propounds the egoist view, but he turns out to be

thoroughly morally bankrupt. In contrast, Sissy (a student at Gradgrind's school) is portrayed as being most engaged with "fancy" and the kindly emotions, and it is she who is the most sympathetic and admirable character in the book. We will see how the positions embodied by these characters are given philosophical expression in Hume's *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, which argues against both the rationalist and the egoist views of morality and in favor of the emotion-based view. We will also see how contemporary psychologists such as Batson and economists such as Frank have attempted to vindicate Hume in this regard, while psychologists such as Hauser have attempted to refute Humean sentimentalism.

This course is intended for all levels of undergraduates and will be open to students without any prerequisites. Three of the central narratives (*Antigone*, *Beowulf* and *High Noon*) will not take a great deal of time for the students to complete. The other two (*Crime and Punishment* and *Hard Times*) are considerably longer, but the students will be able to read them in their entirety over the course of the 15-week semester. The theoretical readings that will comment and expand on the narratives will be assigned in relatively short doses — ten to twenty pages at a time — and will be read alongside the narrative texts.

The students will engage with the ideas in the texts by talking and writing about them. Class-time will be strongly oriented toward lively, engaging, and informal discussion. There will be four short (2-3 page) writing assignments, which will ask the students to describe accurately aspects of the reading they have done. There will be two longer (5-7 page) essay assignments, which will ask the students to develop and argue for either an interpretive thesis or for their own view of the origin of some feature of morality. And there will be a final exam that will consist of two in-class essay questions. In addition to completing the University's standard course evaluation form at the end of term, the students will also be invited to submit a special evaluation form that will determine how well the course enabled the students to

comprehend both the basic question of the course and the connections between the different disciplines and time periods studies.

Faculty preparation and plan of work. I have always thought that profound thinkers (whether they be novelists, philosophers, psychologists, etc.) converge again and again on the same fundamental questions about humanity, and that disciplinary boundaries pose an obstacle to appreciating how such thinkers' insights engage with each other and speak to the same fundamental human concerns. This belief has led me, in my scholarly work, to bring philosophical positions into contact not only with the work of psychologists and other social scientists, but also with movies and works of fiction. And in teaching philosophical classes on the origins of morality, I have consistently brought up examples from novels and movies as talking points for classroom discussion. But I have never before made novels or movies central course assignments — partly because of the disciplinary boundaries of the curriculum, and partly because of my own uncertainty about how to teach a class-session that has as it primary text a narrative instead of an argument. I relish the opportunity this grant would give me to spend the summer months of 2011 and 2012 preparing, and the course-time actually learning how, to teach these kinds of texts. My preparation will focus on studying the works of fiction and learning about the pedagogy of philosophical approaches to literature (about which I have cited several articles in the bibliography). Doing so will enable me to bring to my students the excitement of seeing the deep connections between the self-reflective thoughts of humans throughout vastly different times and places, which has always been for me the most rewarding and sustaining aspect of the study of morality. I fully expect, as well, that this experience will reveal to me new avenues of intellectual investigation, as I explore for the first time in great detail how some of the world's greatest narratives have confronted the moral question.

NEH Enduring Questions Course Grant: Bibliography
Michael B. Gill, Associate Professor of History, University of Arizona

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NEH Enduring Questions Course Grant: Core Reading List
Michael B. Gill, Associate Professor of History, University of Arizona

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